School Days

GUIDEPOSTS TO MENTAL HEALTH—2

New York State Department of Mental Hygiene

GUIDEPOSTS TO MENTAL HEALTH

1. Life Begins
2. School Days
3. Teen Time
4. Your Job
5. Your Marriage
6. The Middle Years
7. The Golden Age

STATE OF NEW YORK
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HYGIENE

AVERELL HARRIMAN
Governor

PAUL H. HOCH, M. D.
Commissioner

Albany, New York
1955

School Days

Tommy starts school in September. Yes, you're right; that will be a big day in his life—a day that marks the beginning of a whole new phase of his development, a whole new pattern of living.

Up to now Tommy has been your little boy. You have kept him close to you; you have cherished and protected him; you have, so far as possible, controlled his daily experiences. Now suddenly he is gone from under your wing and for several hours every day someone else takes over the role of mother. This someone will play a very important part in Tommy's life. She will be your ally in helping him weather the storms of growing up, in guiding him along the road to happy, healthy maturity.

Leaving home is an ordeal

Maybe it isn't so easy for Tommy—this separation from home for long hours each day. He may be worried about the somewhat terrifying prospect of going out into the world. You will remember that the security of his home and the love of his parents have been the very foundation of his life. Now more than ever he needs to be assured that your love goes with him into this strange new world—a warm familiar precious thing for him to cling to. He must know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Mother and Daddy and Baby Sister and Buttons, the dog, will be waiting for him when he comes home, that nothing has changed in his absence; his teddy bear is still sitting on the chair beside his bed; and Baby Sister has not usurped his place in your hearts.

The teacher will help Tommy a great deal in making this initial adjustment. As a substitute for you she will provide during part of the day the affection and understanding that become even more essential when he faces so much that is unfamiliar and difficult. She will take an interest in his problems and help him to solve them. The teacher who is sincerely concerned with her job of training the future citizens of our world, will regard each child as an individual, taking pains to find out what lies beneath the surface, what causes his behavior, and what he needs—physically, intellectually or emotionally—that she or you can give him.

You and the teacher will work together from now on. She needs your help and you need hers. Tommy needs both of you.

He likes his new freedom

Once he has got over the first hurdle—the wrench of departing from the safety of home—Tommy's first reaction to his new stature may be an open revolt against these ties of loving supervision that have bound him so closely during all of his brief life. During the first few years of school there may be many little acts of rebellion against authority in general, some directed at Mother or Daddy, some at Teacher. Frequently, particularly in the classroom, these will take the form of testing people out—persisting in some forbidden action for the sole purpose of finding out just how much he can get away with. Usually, however, this defiance is merely a gesture. Parents and teachers need not be unduly upset at this thoroughly normal type of behavior if their basic relationships with the child are satisfactory. A child would rather win praise than reproof from both parents and teachers, if he feels sure of their affection.

Let him be himself

Parents who want the very best *for* their children sometimes demand the very best *from* them, or at least their particular idea of what constitutes the best. They have a preconceived idea of the angel-faced, soft-voiced, dainty little miss they think Susie ought to be. And if she happens to be a husky, vigorous youngster given to climbing trees and shouting, they push, criticize and nag poor little Susie until she becomes convinced that she is not acceptable to them as herself. A child cannot be forced into a mold. Even if sister Carrie's Ellen is a perfect little lady, their Susie is made of sturdier stuff and it's up to them to accept her and love her for what she is.

This same principle holds true in your child's school work. If you expect Tommy to do as well in arithmetic as Jimmy Jones next door, you may be setting a standard that is too high for him. The teacher must bear this in mind too. Even Jimmy may not be quite as good at arithmetic as his older brother. If he is expected to measure up, the fact that he constantly falls short can undermine his confidence and bring about a feeling of inadequacy.

Help him achieve success

You don't want your child to grow up handicapped by feelings of inferiority. He must experience the satisfaction of accomplishment. Give him due praise for performing *to the best of his ability*. Show him how to find a practical use for what he has learned and help him to find some activity in which he can distinguish himself. Teachers have plenty of opportunity to explore a child's capacities and aptitudes. The good teacher manages to find something at which each child can excel, if only momentarily. If necessary, she *creates* a situation in which the timid child who feels inferior can bask in the warmth of the spotlight. She is particularly concerned about the child who withdraws into a world of daydreams to escape the difficulties of the real world about him.

Little Mary Smith who is *too* quiet and *too* retiring may have poor grades and no particular talent to develop, but she can be brought out of her shell if she is asked to bring her pet kitten to school and tell the other children how it found its way to her door one stormy night. Mary will positively glow with the feeling of having done something to command attention and respect. She has competed successfully with other children. She will go home and tell her mother how the children all crowded around the basket and asked if they could stroke the kitten. Mother will be proud of her, and Mary will feel once more that lovely, prideful feeling of accomplishment, feeling it even more deeply now that she sees it reflected in the eyes of someone who loves her.

The early school years, especially while they're learning to read, are years of pressure for these little folks—pressure at school and at home. So much is expected of them. There are so many new things to learn and old things to remember. Sometimes something has to slip and it may be something the child learned a long time ago, but now forgets, merely because he is under such tension. If you are horrified to discover some day that Tommy at seven or eight is wetting the bed like a baby, it would be well for you to find out just what is worrying him. Even grownups sometimes revert to childish behavior under strain.

Help him choose a "good gang"

From the beginning of his school life Tommy will be seeking out friends. At first it will be a single friend that he wants—a pal. There will be a succession of them,

probably all different, but alike in one respect. They will like Tommy for himself and give him the necessary feeling of being loved and wanted. This affection he receives from his friends differs from any other that he knows in that it is not tied up with demands or criticism or reservations. It is given freely and unconditionally to *him* as he is.

As he gets older this seeking after friends will develop into the gang spirit. Youngsters approaching adolescence will want to belong to a group (of their own sex at this age), preferably a large impressive group. This is the time when parents and teachers must exercise all the influence they have in guiding boys and girls toward "good gangs." They are usually eager to join boys clubs, 4-H Clubs, Cub Scouts, Campfire Girls, and church groups. Through such organizations they are channelled into wholesome constructive activity.

Their activities and the companions they choose when they are 10 or 12 will have a lasting effect on their personalities. Boys and girls on the threshold of their teens are developing attitudes that they will carry into adult life.

He learns to live in a group

The ability to get along with the gang, to fit in satisfactorily as a member of a group is a culmination of something the youngster has been learning ever since he first started to school. In his very first classroom he became a member of a group—not an intimate family circle where his place was unique and concessions were made to him as a matter of course—but a group in which he had to hold his own, meeting the other members on equal terms. Through practice, sometimes through painful trial and error, he has learned the rules of group living.

Parents and teachers alike should be on the alert for failures in this important life lesson. Rejection by the group is not only a symptom of poor adjustment but it may have serious consequences in its effect on the individual child. The teacher particularly is in a position to assist the boy or girl who is too shy, or the one who is too aggressive, or the one who has not learned to compromise. It is usually a simple matter in the beginning. When the maladjustment continues for a long time, however, it is likely to leave some scars. Many a bitter man, or woman, could have been spared much unhappiness if he had learned early in life how to make himself acceptable to others.

He wants to be grown up

In this period of rapid change when exciting vistas of our modern complex life unfold before their eager eyes, boys and girls are impatient with the fetters of childhood. They want, oh so badly, to be grown up. At the same time they are aware of their inability to cope with the problems of an adult world. In times of stress or trouble they are poignantly conscious of their helplessness, and their need of guidance, comfort and protection. Mother, father, and teacher as well, must be their constant haven of help; but they must also be able to withstand without undue alarm the sometimes shocking gestures these same youngsters make with the sole purpose of showing how grown-up they are.

Little girls of 8 or 10 will rebel against "kid" styles in their dresses and secretly experiment with Mother's make-up. Boys will smoke cigarettes filched from Dad's pocket and show off their knowledge of SEX by repeating the off-color expressions and stories they always manage to pick up somewhere. It is better to accept this behavior for what it is—an outward expression of an inner yearning toward maturity.

Give him a home to grow in

All through these years Tommy grows incredibly fast, changing overnight, it seems, from a tyke in little boy pants into a husky, independent youngster, passionately devoted to baseball, but beginning to have one eye on the girls. If, through these years, you have given him every chance to grow and develop as himself; if you have provided for him a home where he could bring, with the certainty that they would be equally welcome, his friends, his troubles and fears, his hopes and enthusiasms; if you have made that home a center of *shared* family activity where Tommy has helped Dad in the garden and little sister has helped Mother with the dishes, and all of you have enjoyed many picnics, movies, family games and other wholesome good times *together;* if you have given him all of this with your whole-hearted unconditional love, your Tommy will be a healthy, happy youngster, ready for the fun of adolescence and fortified against its difficulties. You will have good reason to be proud when now and then you can glimpse in his day-to-day dealings with life the fine young man that he is going to be.